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ABSTRACT

This activity guide is intended to further school-family-community partnerships to help all children succeed. The guide is based on "conversation starters" which were created during the initial phase of a Family Involvement/Community Engagement Project conducted by the Laboratory at Brown University from September 1996 through June 1997. In each of the project's six schools, a team of school administrators, teachers, family advocates, families, and community representatives began conversations about school/family/community connections to support school reform from different points of view. Each school then developed its own action plan. The three conversation starters were: (1) Where is our school headed?; (2) How is our school involving families and the community?; and (3) How can our school broaden its family and community support? Using these questions as a starting point, this activity guide discusses how to expand on the conversation. Suggestions are organized into the following areas: (1) "Getting Started"; (2) "More than Just Talk"; (3) "Where Is Our School Headed? What Are Its Goals for Students?"; (4) "How Is Our School Involving Families and the Community? Why Is It Involving Them?"; and (5) "How Can Our School Broaden Its Community and Family Support?" (EV)

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An Activity Guide for Partnerships Among Schools, Families and Communities

Conversation starters

for partnerships among schools, families, and communities

SCHOOLS ARE FACED WITH THE CHALLENGE OF HELPING *ALL* CHILDREN SUCCEED. BUT SCHOOLS CAN'T DO IT ALONE. AN EFFECTIVE SCHOOL MUST BE THE HEART OF A THRIVING PARTNERSHIP AMONG EDUCATORS, FAMILIES, BUSINESS PEOPLE, AND COMMUNITY LEADERS — AN ORGANIZATION HARNESSING THE ENERGIES OF THE COMMUNITY TO MAKE IT A PLACE OF LEARNING.

This expanded role does not come easily. Concerns about school results run deep. At businesses and over neighborhood fences, many are asking "Why aren't schools doing a better job?" Unfortunately, the commitment and energy for solutions can be fragmented. Schools must draw upon and connect the resources and contributions of all segments of the community to develop new strategies for improving student success. For each school within a community, the school/family/community partnership will look different. But there are good ways to begin building partnerships.

START TALKING. This poster and activity guide offer three starting points for conversations about engaging families and the community in school improvement. The questions can be used by any school group to initiate and broaden a discussion that can strengthen connections among schools, families, and communities and help to improve student learning.

The poster itself can provoke discussion. If displayed prominently, it can get many people involved in a conversation about ways families and community members can work with schools to help all children become successful in life.

We suggest three key questions as starting points for discussion:

- ☞ **Where is our school headed?**
- ☞ **How is our school involving families and the community?**
- ☞ **How can our school broaden its family & community support?**

There is no "right" way to start. Be sure to discuss all three topics eventually to build the strongest and most complete partnerships. Each starting point identifies the "critical question" and suggests some follow-up questions that will help answer it. Add your own follow-up questions. Behind each question are real people and real concerns—each starting point contains two real stories to stimulate your thinking about strategies for continuing the conversation in your school community.

Getting Started

"Now that I have this poster, what do I do with it? Do I put it up? How do I use the questions in the activity guide to get people talking?"

Yes, the poster should be displayed—in a prominent place where many families, educators, members of the community, and other visitors will have an opportunity to view it and be intrigued by it. The activity guide can be used to get many people involved in a conversation about the ways families and members of the community can work with schools to help all children learn what they need to be successful in life. Here's a suggestion for how you might use the poster and activity guide to get a discussion underway:

Gather a discussion group. This can be an existing group like a school improvement team, an advisory council, or the PTA. Or, you may decide to create a group just to focus on these discussion questions. Ideally, any group would include the voices of educators, families, and community members. *Remember, the initial group will need to include more and more people over time to help expand the dialogue.*

Set the stage for discussion. Don't assume everyone in the group holds the same vision of school reform or the role of family and community involvement in that process. Before beginning the conversation starters, use an icebreaker exercise to get everyone started "on the same page." *Here's one example of an icebreaker you can use with your group:* (YOU WILL NEED – CONSTRUCTION OR POSTER PAPER; SCISSORS; GLUE; MARKERS; OLD MAGAZINES; CRAFT SUPPLIES SUCH AS GLITTER, FOIL PAPER.)

Ask the group to think about this story:

> It's five years in the future. Educators, families and community members have been working hard to make your school an "ideal" school (i.e., a school where all students can succeed). Your efforts have paid off. Your school has just won an award as an outstanding effective school. Now the local paper is coming to take pictures of your school for the Sunday edition.

Then ask the group to work together to create the "picture" of their school for the newspaper using the materials you have on hand. (TIME: 20 MINUTES)

Once completed, be sure to post your picture. You may find it helpful to refer back to this vision as you move through the discussion questions on the poster.

BEGIN THE DISCUSSION. Have the group select where to start. There is no "right" way or place to begin. The challenge is to work your way through all three sets of key discussion questions. Copy pages 3, 4 & 5 as handouts when you discuss each set of questions, or list the questions (as they appear in the guide and on the back of the poster) on chart paper or a blackboard so they are easy for all to see. You may also want to have them translated into other languages, depending on the needs of the group.

Be sure you have some way of recording the ideas that come from your discussion—write your ideas on newsprint, tape-record the discussion, or have someone take minutes.

MAKE A PLAN FOR NEXT STEPS. The questions on the back of the poster and in the activity guide are just to get you started. Your group will need to decide for itself where and how to go beyond the discussion. Take some time at the end of the discussion to agree on your immediate next steps. Next steps might be to bring more people into the discussion, gather more information or recommend a change in current practice. Whatever your group decides to do as a next step, be sure to identify who will be responsible for different tasks and a timeline for implementing your plan.

More than just talk...

Meaningful conversation around family and community connections and school reform needs structure and follow-through. Here are a few tips to make sure your conversation is more than just talk.

☞ **Remember your purpose.**

Helping all students achieve high standards needs to become a responsibility shared by schools, families, and the community. Schools can play a critical role in convening representatives from these stakeholder groups for a dialogue about how to make this happen.

☞ **Set a consistent core group.**

Others may attend to enrich the discussion, but a core group needs to take responsibility for getting the conversation started and *keeping it going.*

☞ **Include the principal or designee.**

It's critical to link the group's work to other improvement activities in the building and the school district.

☞ **Choose a facilitator or co-facilitators to lead the group.**

Choose a *recorder* to document ideas and next steps.

☞ **Take your time.**

Be prepared for a series of meetings. Allow time for extended conversations.

☞ **Start where you like.**

To plan a comprehensive strategy, you should discuss all three conversation starter blocks, but it doesn't matter where you begin.

☞ **Develop an action plan.**

After discussing all three starter blocks, agree on a few creative strategies for extending the conversation over the next three to nine months. In your plan, include goals, the selected strategies, roles and responsibilities, expected outcomes, an evaluation plan, and timeline. Revisit the plan from time to time, assess whether it's working, and revise it as needed.

Where is our school headed? What are its goals for students?

Schools across the U.S. are setting high standards for student achievement—using state and national goals, and using research to find new teaching and learning strategies. Begin your conversation about what your school is doing to help everyone reach a common vision and understanding of how your school is helping all students succeed.

Critical questions to ask about our school:

- ☞ What are my school's goals for improving student achievement?
- ☞ How are these goals connected to our state's standards?
- ☞ Do all teachers have the same understanding of the school's goals and specific standards? Do families? Do community members?
- ☞ How do these understandings differ?

Recently in...

CONNECTICUT

At a school planning meeting, everyone felt that this year's faculty workshop series should focus on what schools, families, and communities can do to help students meet high standards. One of the teachers said, "What are we going to say to families about curriculum and instruction? I don't even know what other teachers are doing. We don't know how to talk about these things. How can we talk to families?" The group discussed different ways to get teachers to talk to each other about what goes on in the classroom as a first step. At the same time, the group decided to survey families to understand what they wanted to know about student learning.

MASSACHUSETTS

An elementary school principal had a clear vision—*children need opportunities to learn wherever they are, not just in school*—and wanted everyone working with children to share this vision of a learner-centered environment. The team working with the principal suggested a retreat for teachers, family members, after-school staff, volunteers, and representatives of community agencies to understand what a learner-centered environment looks like and how to begin to use different approaches in the classroom, in after-school programs, and at home so that all children can achieve high standards.

Next steps

After this discussion, you can move on to one about **how our school is involving families and the community**, or one about **how our school can broaden its family and community support**.

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How is our school involving families & the community? Why is it involving them?

Broadening the responsibility for school reform to include partnerships with families and community members is a challenge. But you may already be doing more than you think. Begin a conversation that identifies what's already happening to involve families and community members in your school. Then look for ways that activities can become better connected to efforts to improve student achievement.

Critical questions to ask about our school:

- ☞ Which of our current school activities involve families and the community? How are these joint efforts linked to student learning? How do we know?
- ☞ Why are we doing what we're doing? What's the real purpose behind our communications, outreach efforts, workshops, and other programs involving families and the community in the school?
- ☞ How are our community and family activities connected to student learning and success?
- ☞ What else does the community need to know about what's happening in the school? What is happening in the community that the school needs to know about?

Recently in...

RHODE ISLAND

Do students and staff really know how families and community members are involved in the school? One middle school team suspected they did not. Their solution: use selected questions from a recent school-wide survey to find out, rather than starting with a new needs assessment. The questions helped the school team identify how the teachers perceive and use family and community support for student achievement.

CONNECTICUT

A team from a large elementary school discovered, through an inventory of family activities, that more than 100 families came into the building each month—so many that school staff were often back at school two or three nights a week. The intense activity was eye-opening ("I didn't know that activity was happening!") but it also raised questions. Why are the same families involved in multiple activities? Why are some families not participating? Do all of our activities serve a purpose? Are they contributing to student performance?

Next steps

After this discussion, you can move on to one about **where our school is headed** and **what its goals are for students**, or about **how our school can broaden its community and family support**.

How can our school broaden its community and family support?

Teachers and families care deeply about children's education. Politicians, taxpayers, and business people care about an educated community and a healthy economy. Some people outside the school actively support the school, while others wish they knew how. Now, begin a conversation that broadens school reform goals beyond family involvement to include business and community interests to create new human and financial support for the school.

Critical questions to ask about our school:

- ☞ How do we broaden and increase support for student success?
- ☞ Who supports us now? How did we get them involved?
- ☞ Who else needs to become involved to make our planning team more representative of different families' voices in our school?
- ☞ Are there important members of the community whose support we need to move forward?
- ☞ How can new resources be tapped? How might we get them invested in school reform?

Recently in...

RHODE ISLAND

A team in a small elementary school watched as the neighborhood changed around them. Few of the new faces in the community were appearing in the school. The team worried that they didn't know what the neighbors (those with and without children in school) expected from the school, or whether newcomers even knew what was happening there. They conducted focus groups to get the conversation started.

MASSACHUSETTS

Two years ago, families, community agencies, local businesses, and other supporters founded a charter school. But even though the school had a broad base of support, staff members felt that many in the community didn't know what a charter school is or how to support the school. The family coordinator decided that families needed to know the school's expectations for involving families at school and strengthening community relations. The coordinator decided to use a family contract to start the conversation.

Next steps

After this discussion, you can move on to one about where our **school is headed** and **what its goals are for students**, or one about **how our school is involving families and the community**.

How this conversation began...

This poster and its "conversation starters" were created during the initial phase of a Family Involvement/Community Engagement Project conducted by the Laboratory at Brown University (LAB) from September 1996 through June 1997.

In each of six schools, a team of school administrators, teachers, family advocates, families, and community representatives began conversations about school/family/community connections to support school reform from different points of view. Each school then developed an action plan, each looking very different and each fitting into other school reform efforts already underway.

The schools included:

- Martin Luther King, Jr. School, Hartford, CT
- Rogers Magnet School, Stamford, CT
- Fletcher School, Cambridge, MA
- Lawrence Family Development Charter School, Lawrence, MA
- Davisville Elementary School, North Kingstown, RI
- Oliver Hazard Perry Middle School, Providence, RI

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Notes

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